

SPEECH

39

OF

MR. POTTER, OF OHIO,

ON THE

REDUCTION OF POSTAGE.

DELIVERED

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JANUARY 13, 1851.

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1851.

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MR. BOTTEN, OF OHIO

SECTION OF LOST

1871

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## REDUCTION OF POSTAGE.

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The House having resolved itself into Committee of the Whole on the bill to reduce and modify the rates of postage,

Mr. POTTER rose and said :

Mr. CHAIRMAN: In answer to the various objections which have been made by various members at different times to this bill, it becomes me to investigate the subject by facts and figures, in order to obviate them. It is for this reason, and that I may be prepared to maintain every position which I have assumed, to fortify every point which has been attacked, that much of what I shall have to say will be from written memorandums. And for their correctness and truth I am responsible.

I will take occasion at the commencement to say, that those gentlemen upon this floor who are most decidedly opposed to this bill, and who represent States, whose receipts for postage does not equal the expenditure for mail service in them, have exhibited a modesty truly becoming to them; for whilst, with one or two exceptions, they have remained silent during this whole discussion, their allies from States where there is a surplus have maintained the controversy. But I fear that when we come to vote upon the bill, they will make themselves felt, if they have not been heard.

The receipts from postage in Maine exceed the cost of transportation.....\$50,000  
 New Hampshire, over..... 20,000  
 Vermont, " ..... 18,000  
 Massachusetts, " .....180,000  
 Rhode Island, " ..... 20,000  
 Connecticut, " ..... 40,000  
 New York, " .....460,000  
 Pennsylvania, " .....200,000  
 Ohio, " ..... 80,000  
 Wisconsin, " ..... 25,000  
 Iowa, " ..... 2,000

It is from these States that we naturally look for support to this bill; and from the immense number of petitions which have been received here from those States, without one single remonstrance from any quarter, we feel assured that the people are in favor of the change proposed. We who live in the paying States, do not complain that this large amount of surplus is drawn from us for the support of the mail service in the less favored portions of the Union. We do not desire that it

should be otherwise, but we do insist that the rates of postage should be reduced to a revenue standard, so long as we contribute so large a share of the means to support this department of the Government.

I am not a little surprised to see gentlemen upon this floor, who represent States yielding a surplus to the Post Office Department, even some of my colleagues from the State of Ohio, which pays more than \$80,000 over her cost of transportation, into the Treasury, opposing this bill. They must certainly have become very benevolent all at once, to be willing to tax themselves and their constituents, to afford postal facilities to their neighbors.

Mr. CARTTER asked if the gentleman included him in the number of his colleagues who opposed a reduction of postage?

Mr. POTTER said he did mean to include him [Mr. CARTTER] in the number.

Mr. CARTTER. Will the gentleman allow me to say that he has mistaken my intentions? I am in favor of a reduction of the rate of postage from ten cents to a uniform rate of five cents.

Mr. POTTER. I was aware of that. The gentleman's amendment will speak for itself; it provides for a uniform rate of five cents for all distances. Sir, it is the result of the gentleman's proposition that I wish to avoid. Adopt it, and instead of a reduction of postage, it would operate only as a reduction of revenue. Four fifths of the letters now carried in the mail pay only five cents; it is only those letters carried over three hundred miles that pay ten cents. My object is, so to reduce the postage upon all mailable matter as to compete with the private expresses upon the short routes. The gentleman's amendment will not effect that object. It affords encouragement to the increase of letters upon the short routes, or those less than three hundred miles, from which nearly all our revenue is derived. Private expresses do not enter into competition with the Post Office Department upon the long routes, and upon these the gentleman's plan would certainly operate injuriously to the revenue, whilst it would produce no change in the receipts upon the short routes.

Mr. CARTTER. I dislike exceedingly to interrupt my friend, but if he will allow me, I wish to submit to him and to the House, whether, after



the amendment I offered, and after the remarks I submitted on a former day in reference to this bill, the gentleman is authorized in coming to the conclusion that I am opposed to reducing the rates of postage down to a revenue standard? I stated expressly in my remarks, that I was in favor of reducing the rates of postage to a revenue standard. I think my colleague does me injustice in coming to the conclusion he does in this matter.

Mr. POTTER. Mr. Chairman, I will do my colleague no injustice; for whilst I must be allowed to comment upon his proposition, I will certainly state it fairly. He says a uniform rate of five cents is a revenue rate. I was only endeavoring to show that the proposition, if adopted, would only tend to diminish the revenue without accomplishing the great end in view, the cheap circulation of valuable information in every part of the country.

I repeat, that the great object in reducing the postage upon short routes, is to bring into the mail the matter now carried by private expresses, as well as to encourage the more general use of the mails, where they are now avoided on account of the high rate upon letters.

Mr. CARTTER. Is my colleague informed of the existence of any private expresses in the vicinity of any of the cities in the State of Ohio, or in any western city?

Mr. POTTER. I am not. I will ask my colleague, whether he is informed of the existence of such expresses in the eastern cities?

Mr. CARTTER. I am aware that private expresses exist in those cities.

Mr. POTTER. It is with these that we wish to compete, by putting the rates, not as low as they carry letters, for I believe they only charge two cents, but at such rates as will tend to discourage their use.

But to resume the subject. It is objected also, that the Postmaster General will not grant mail facilities, or service upon routes on which there is not revenue derived sufficient to pay the expenses. Can this be true? By the adoption of this rule,

Maryland would have to be curtailed over	\$30,000
Virginia, over.....	60,000
North Carolina, over.....	110,000
South Carolina, over.....	40,000
Georgia, over.....	60,000
Florida, over.....	15,000
Illinois, over.....	40,000
Tennessee, over.....	10,000
Alabama, over.....	80,000
Mississippi, over.....	25,000
Arkansas, over.....	30,000
Texas, over.....	30,000

for each of these States fall short the above sums, of revenue sufficient to pay barely the costs of transportation of their mails, to say nothing about the commissions paid to their postmasters.

Mr. HAMMOND asked, whether in this estimate the transportation of the mail through Maryland, &c., upon the great southern route to New Orleans, was embraced?

Mr. POTTER. I will do these States justice in this respect, if the gentleman will only have patience. But we do not ask to have this rule applied to these States. We protest against it, and it is unfair to charge that such a rule has been adopted by the Department. It is true, that it is a strong argument against putting *increased* service

upon a route, but I deny that it is any part or parcel of the regulations of the Department.

Mr. SWEETSER desired to know of his colleague whether there were not post roads in Ohio upon which no service had been ordered by the Department?

Mr. POTTER. There may be, particularly upon the routes established last September; and perhaps some others where there had been no competition in the bids for the service, and those that were made were so exorbitantly high that it would be unreasonable to ask for service at such rates. But I regard the Post Office Department as a branch of the National Government, necessarily so for the connection and continuance of routes; as one of the conditions in the bond of our Union, strengthening its ties by a common interest, and should be managed as a whole, regardless of local divisions, any further than they may be necessary for the promotion of the general welfare of the people of the whole country.

But, sir, I have been treating this subject as if the awful forebodings of the timid and wavering upon this floor, of broken-down stage coaches, lean horses, hungry drivers, deserted towns and villages, grass-grown streets, lean and starved postmasters, and worst of all, a bankrupt Treasury, were about to be realized.

I have a word of comfort for that class of our friends. My colleague who first addressed the committee upon this subject, [Mr. CARTTER,] declared that the effect of a reduction of postage would be "to reduce the Post Office Department to a state of bankruptcy." My friend says that he has come to this conclusion "from the *little* examination he has been able to give this subject." I am sorry, for the sake of the measure, that that gentleman has not brought his usual industry and acumen to the task of this examination, for I feel quite sure that had he done so we should find in him one of the strongest advocates of this bill.

Another of my colleagues [Mr. SWEETSER] says that this measure will ultimately charge the Post Office Department upon the Treasury; but he gives no reasons for it. He says, also, that allusion has been made to the English system, but he does not intend to discuss that, and dismisses the subject by saying, "I will state, in general terms, that we cannot assimilate ours to theirs, and no legitimate argument can be drawn from it." I might say of him, as I have already done of my other colleague, that I am sorry, for the fate of this bill, that he had not looked at the reports of the British Post Office Department.

Mr. SWEETSER. In my argument the other day, I gave as a reason why the rate proposed in this bill was below the revenue standard, that the bill itself asked for a million and a half—

Mr. POTTER. I do not want the gentleman to make his speech over again; I cannot spare the time allotted me by the rules of the House; he can read it in the Globe. He spoke at length, and was complimented by the very general attention of the committee. This should satisfy my friend without my now giving him an opportunity to repeat it. I am sorry, however, that he has given this subject so little attention. Had he devoted a little more time to it I do not doubt that instead of his opposition, this measure would to-day have his warmest support.

My colleague [Mr. SWEETSER] challenges me to bring forward my facts and figures to show that



the reduction of postage will not bankrupt the Department.

I propose now to do it. I regret the necessity that I am under to vindicate the measure here upon this floor, and to spend the time of the committee upon it; but what I say is said for the ear of members, with the hope that those who are not prejudiced against the bill, but are anxious to adopt, as they say, "a revenue point," will listen, if they have not examined the subject themselves, to the facts that I intend to lay before the committee.

This subject has been so fully elaborated by the gentleman from Missouri, [Mr. PHELPS,] that I will not trouble the committee with the details of our own or the British Post Office, but will state the general results:

*Statistics of the American Post Office for ten years.*

Years.	Post office's	Post roads.	Receipts.	Expenses.	Letters.
		<i>Miles.</i>			
1839.....	12,680	133,999	\$4,477,619	\$4,654,718	.....
1840.....	13,468	155,639	4,530,265	4,759,110	27,535,554
1841.....	13,682	155,026	4,379,317	4,567,228	.....
1842.....	13,733	149,732	4,546,246	4,627,716	.....
1843.....	13,814	142,295	4,295,925	4,374,713	24,267,552
1844.....	14,103	144,687	4,237,285	4,320,731	.....
1845.....	14,183	143,844	4,289,841	4,320,731	.....
1846.....	14,601	147,679	3,487,199	4,084,296	.....
1847.....	15,146	153,818	3,945,893	3,971,310	52,173,480
1848.....	16,159	163,208	4,371,077	4,325,850	58,069,075
1849.....	16,747	167,703	4,705,176	4,479,049	62,000,000

From 1839 to 1849 inclusive, it is seen by this table that under the old high rates of postage in 1840, the number of letters sent through the United States post office was 27,535,554—receipts \$4,530,265; and there was a constant diminution of letters and receipts from postages, down to 1843, when the number of letters had run down to 24,267,552—revenue, \$4,295,225; leaving, in 1843, an actual deficit in the department of \$78,788; and even then, as now, we found the gentleman from Indiana [Mr. BROWN] opposed to any change; using the same argument then as now, that the Department would be bankrupted by the proposed reduction. The gentleman says he has been disappointed in the result. I am sure, if he lives, and the present proposed reduction takes place, he will be again disappointed. I was a member of this House in 1845, when the reduction was made, and voted for it. That gentleman voted against it. We have both been disappointed. The effect upon the revenue has been more salutary than any of us anticipated.

Before this reduction in 1845, the old rates were twenty-five cents on the single letter for the longest distance and six and a quarter cents for the shortest. We changed it to ten and five; and under the operation of the reduction the number of letters increased from 24,267,552 in 1843, so that in 1849 there were transported over 62,000,000, and the revenue in the same period had increased from \$4,295,925 to \$4,705,176, and in 1850 to \$5,552,971.

The Department during this period has not only sustained itself, but it has carried light, truth and happiness to millions of our people, who under our former system would never have been reached.

Under our old system, the Department was only known to the people by the exorbitance of its charges, amounting almost to oppression. Under the reduced system it has become the people's friend, and is respected and fostered by them. Now, instead of efforts to defraud the Department

of its legitimate revenue, you find an interest everywhere felt in its maintenance. This is really the only branch of the General Government whose benefits are brought to the door of every citizen of the Union every day of his life.

The gentleman from Indiana [Mr. DUNHAM] says that "any argument drawn from the operation of the British Post Office, in support of a reduction in this country, is fallacious."

Let us look a moment into it and see whether he is right, first showing the results of the reduction. The postage upon all half ounce letters in the United Kingdom of Great Britain, for any distance, is one penny, equal to about two cents of our money. In 1839, the last year of their high or old rates, the letters transported in the mail amounted to 76,000,000. In 1848, under the reduction, 347,000,000.

In 1848, the gross revenue of the Department, including everything, was.....£2,181,016  
Cost of management.....£1,196,520  
Cost of steam and packet  
service added.....701,580

1,898,100

192,916

Deduct fees for registering money letters, (not embraced in our system).... 56,000

And there is still a surplus of.....£216,916

Over one million of dollars in the Treasury; and the beauty of the system is, that the revenue is increasing every year in a greater ratio than the expenses. It has been claimed by the opponents of this bill that the money order office in Great Britain was a source of revenue; but the returns show that the commissions in 1848 on money orders were £67,376, whilst the expenses of that office were £77,976, being an actual loss to the revenue of £10,600.

It is said their country is more compact than ours, and the cost of transportation and management are less. How is the fact?

We have just seen that the cost of management in Great Britain, in 1848, was £1,196,500—equal to about \$5,982,600; whilst in this country, in 1850, the expenditures were \$5,212,953—theirs costing more by \$779,627 than ours. These are some of the facts and figures that my colleague [Mr. SWEETSER] desired me to produce to prove my position, and the arguments which the gentleman from Indiana [Mr. DUNHAM] declares to be so fallacious.

Another gentleman from Indiana, [Mr. BROWN,] who was a member of Congress in 1845, and voted against the reduction, objects to any comparison of a cheap system of postage in this country to that of Great Britain, because, he says, their sources of revenue are more numerous than ours, and instances the registration of money letters. He says, too, that their packet service is not charged to the Post Office Department. He very carefully forgot to add, that whilst we receive \$919,000 for postage on newspapers and pamphlets, Great Britain receives nothing, the postage being embraced in stamp duties, and going into the general instead of the Post Office revenue. But I have shown from the official reports of the British Post Office, that after adding the cost of the packet service to the expenses of the Post Office Department, and after deducting from the general revenue the amount which he says arises from



money orders and the registration of letters, there is still a surplus left to the credit of the Department of over \$1,000,000.

But I have said before, and I still insist, that the reduction in this country will enhance the revenue in a greater degree than the same reduction would in England. Our people are educated, are migratory, are commercial. We have a vast extent of territory constantly filling up with emigrants from the old States; and the associations of our fatherland always inspire us with the gift and the desire to write. And when the tax upon our communications is reduced to a mere nominal sum, everybody that can write, will write.

The gentleman from Indiana [Mr. BROWN] is mistaken in his views in regard to the increase of clerk hire, on account of the great increase of the number of letters to be mailed and delivered. Every postmaster knows that it will be a great deal less labor to make out and enter his post bills with one rate, to enter his account of mails received, and to make out and add up his quarterly returns, than where there are two rates. And in the large offices, where the very best and highest salaried clerks are employed to assort the letters for mailing, where there are two rates, under the uniform system, their services will be dispensed with, and in their places any common laborer who cannot even read or write, will stamp and prepare all letters for mailing with the utmost ease. This simplifying of the accounts will dispense with much of the force now employed in the different post offices, by which I have no doubt a great saving will result to the Department.

Much has been said about the free circulation of newspapers in the counties where they are published. But, as I have said before, I am satisfied that where the postmaster receives no compensation for receiving and delivering the newspaper, he will be very likely to discourage its circulation, at any rate through the mail; but where he receives fifty per cent, as his commission, he will take some pains to encourage the formation of clubs, for the mere compensation derived from commissions. I propose that papers circulated and delivered in the State where printed, shall pay one half cent for each number not weighing over two ounces, and out of the State, one cent. There is some propriety in this distinction, from the fact that in most of the States the laws are printed by authority in the newspapers, and their dissemination

in the State should be afforded as cheaply as possible.

I do not wish to embarrass the country press in its circulation, for I have seventeen country papers in my district, and desire to see them all prosper; and my opinion is, that a free circulation in the counties in which they are published will not tend to increase their circulation; for I do not know of a man in my district who would decline taking a newspaper any the sooner because he had to pay twenty-six cents a year for it. And then, again, the newspapers in my country are very strongly inclined to free trade, and a free-trade article would not look very well along side of an article advocating a patent to monopolize, by law of Congress, the right to furnish news to any particular portion of the people. It would look a little like legislation for one class of citizens to the injury of others. They now receive all their papers free, and should be, and I have no doubt will be, satisfied, without being authorized to send theirs free to their subscribers. My constituents are not paupers, and are not so insensible to the principles of justice as to desire this Government, or any body else, to work for them for nothing. They know that the Post Office Department must be sustained, and they are willing to contribute to its support. However, this is a question that I am not strenuous about, if the committee see fit to adopt such an amendment to the bill. One of my colleagues is a little surprised, he says, that I should have been wrought upon by these outside influences, and against the interests of the people I represent, to advocate the reduction of postage. I have always been the advocate of low postage. It is no new thing with me. I believe my constituents are also, and if that gentleman's are not, I mistake their sentiments very much. There are some gentlemen upon this floor who are afraid of innovation, of reform, or change. They are in favor of ancient usages and customs. The gentleman from Indiana [Mr. DUNHAM] is opposed to copying after the English or any of the old hereditary kingdoms of Europe. The gentleman, I suppose, distrusts his own ability to distinguish the good from the bad, and would therefore exclude all. The remark of Voltaire may be well applied to that class: "Our wretched species is such that those who walk the beaten path, are always throwing stones at those who are recommending new ones."



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